

Bangladesh National Party heightens confrontation with the government

By Sarath Kumara
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Violent clashes between the Awami League (AL)-led government and the opposition are continuing in Bangladesh. At least five people were killed in police shootings last Friday aimed at suppressing protests called by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led 18-party opposition alliance.

According to a UN press release issued last Friday, at least 88 people have been killed and hundreds injured in recent weeks in clashes between security forces and opposition activists. The government has responded to a series of hartals (general strikes) by arresting prominent opposition leaders and increasing state repression. The opposition, for its part, has used violence to enforce its hartals, while Islamicist elements have mounted communal attacks against members of Bangladesh's Hindu and Buddhist minorities.

Last week Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhith accused the opposition of deliberately seeking to sabotage the country's economy as part of an "anti-state and anti-Bangladesh" conspiracy: "They are enforcing hartals thinking if the economy collapses, the government will be toppled."

Many ordinary people are concerned that the opposition-led protests are causing economic hardship. Bachchu Mia, a vegetable vendor in Dhaka told khabarsouthasia.com that trucks from the countryside are stranded and prices are rising, affecting sales. He also said that customers who used to buy one kg of vegetables now take only 250 grams due to price hikes. He asked, "Should we die for the [BNP] leaders? How will we survive?"

Villagers also suffer because they cannot sell the goods. A farmer from Ghiyor in central Bangladesh, Mohammad Malek, said: "This aubergine sells at least Tk 40 (\$.50) per kilogram in Dhaka. But here I do not

find buyers at Tk 10 (\$.13) per kilogram."

The business community and economists are worried that the conflict between the Awami League and BNP is adversely impacting on production and discouraging foreign investment.

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association President Shafiul Islam Mohiuddin said each one-day hartal costs the critical apparel sector—which earns \$19 billion annually or 85 percent of all Bangladeshi export earnings—some Tk 15 crore (\$1.9 m). He said, "Our RMG (Ready-Made Garments) industry depends on raw materials imports. Halt of traffic will certainly cut off the supply chain, seriously hampering production."

According to one Bangladeshi press report, foreign retailers, including Wal-Mart, have already slashed \$500 million worth of orders from Bangladesh.

The struggle between the Awami League and BNP—for decades bitter rivals representing different factions of the Bangladesh elite—has intensified after a series of explosive strikes and popular protests, particularly among Bangladeshi textile workers. Among the world's poorest-paid workers, textile workers in Dacca and elsewhere have repeatedly struck for higher wages and clashed with police.

In an attempt to rally popular support, the AL government is making an appeal to popular grievances against the BNP and especially its Islamist allies in the Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI).

Last year, the government launched war crime trials against 8 JeI and 2 BNP leaders for their role in the brutal repression that the Pakistani military mounted before and during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War, which led to the independence of Bangladesh.

Following the February conviction and sentencing to life imprisonment of the JeI's General-Secretary Abdul

Quader Molla, the JeI mounted a series of violent protests. In early March, the BNP entered the fray to press its demands concerning the forthcoming elections, which constitutionally can be held no later than the beginning of next year.

In 2011, the AL government passed a law abolishing the practice of having a “neutral caretaker government” conduct Bangladesh’s elections. In justifying this decision it pointed to the actions of the last military-backed “caretaker” government, which held office from 2007-9. It long postponed the elections, implemented brutal austerity measures that worsened poverty and unemployment, and forcibly suppressed protests.

Opposition to the military and to the BNP’s own record in government resulted in a humiliating defeat for the BNP in the December 2008 elections, the country’s last. The BNP won just 29 seats in the 300-seat parliament, and its JeI ally was reduced to 3 seats.

The BNP is deeply worried over the lack of popular support for its rightwing alliance. While it has rallied some sections of the population due to the AL’s own reactionary, pro-market reforms, it largely relies on the support it continues to receive from sections of the state apparatus, above all the military. The BNP was founded by military ruler General Ziaur Rahman, the deceased husband of current party leader, Khaleda Zia.

Speaking on March 25, BNP leader Khaleda Zia tacitly invited the military to intervene in the current crisis, saying that the “army will not sit idle while anarchy rules the country. If necessary, they will take action to restore law and order.”

The AL immediately protested that Khaleda was inviting the military to take power and install martial law. Home Minister Muhiuddin Khan Alamgir said, “Sedition is a crime,” announcing plans for legal action. Another Awami League leader said, “Khaleda is desperate to destroy democracy.”

BNP Acting Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir denied the charges, telling a press conference on Monday that the BNP “believes in democracy” and “does not support any military intervention.”

This is belied by the BNP’s history. Moreover, in recent years it has actively cultivated the JeI and other Islamicist forces, whose retrogressive nature has been exemplified by the wave of communal attacks they

have mounted against minorities since last October. On March 22, 28 temples, around 180 houses and dozens of shops belonging to Hindu and Buddhist communities were destroyed by Islamic fanatics.

While moving against the Islamists, the AL government is simultaneously caving in to their antidemocratic demands, by banning blogs accused of blasphemy by the Islamists. On the weekend, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said there was no need for agitations against those defaming because her government has already formed “a high-powered committee” to root out those using social media to “hurt” Islam. “If the committee finds anyone involved in evil deeds,” boasted Hasina, “it will take immediate action.”

These actions have strengthened the fundamentalists. Islami Andolan Bangladesh held a rally in Dacca last Friday and announced plans to besiege the Prime Minister’s office on April 25 if the government did not arrest “atheist bloggers who insulted Islam.” Other demands they put forward include, restoration of the phrase “Absolute trust and faith upon Almighty Allah” in the constitution and the establishment of “Islamic rule.”

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